

Don't fence them in

by Rupert Jannasch

Modern scale pig farming with its large, crowded and stuffy barns probably does not appeal to most people or to the pigs which live in these concrete and steel dwellings. But in a small barn in Lapand, near Bridgewater, Nova Scotia, I found two pigkeepers who are showing there is an alternative.

Using more than 600 bales of straw and hay to bed down their 130 sows plus offspring, Tom and Sharon van Milligen are demonstrating how improved animal welfare can also mean better human welfare. Groups of sows roam about long loafing areas rooting through bales of hay and snoozing where they choose. Litters of piglets intermingle almost buried in straw while their mothers doze waiting to be nursed.

These scenes are the exception in the specialized world of pork production where segregation and confinement are standard practices.

Four years ago, the van Milligens were more conventional. They kept their pigs on concrete, the dry sows were confined to tie stalls, and they used farrowing crates to prevent crushing of newborn piglets.

At the time, Tom was the Pork Nova Scotia representative to the Canadian Animal Welfare Committee. He recalls being challenged by the producer of CBC-TV's *Land and Sea*, Joan MacKinnon, who was researching animal welfare issues, to improve the welfare of his animals according to the methods adopted by Swedish farmers. In Sweden, federal law stipulates that pigs have access to loafing areas and that piglets be kept on litter for at least one month.

After a government sponsored trip to Europe with a provincial engineer and swine specialist, Tom returned ready to build a new barn. When I asked him why he took this risk when most pig farmers are going out of business and he himself could soon be retiring, he answered in his quiet and measured voice, "Yes, but life gets awfully dull."

His barn is a wooden structure that might look like many other pig barns except that there are a lot of windows. Tom feels it costs less than building a conventional steel building for the same number of sows because the interior design is much simpler.

There are two sections to the barn. One is for dry sows and the other contains what are called the farrowing and weaning rooms. The gestating section houses two groups of

about 50 sows each, as well as several gigantic boars. From here, groups of about a dozen sows ready to give birth are moved to the farrowing rooms shortly before they are due.

The farrowing rooms are simply extra large box stalls with a dozen farrowing pens on the outside wall. Unlike conventional farrowing crates, the sows are free to enter and leave their pens at will. The newly born pigs are confined by a small wooden barrier for 10 days after birth.

Van Milligen admits there has been some problem with mortality because the sows are not restrained from movement among their young.

At first, "we took our old sows from the other barns and put them in pens," explains Tom. "This was not a good idea. Those sows never developed the proper habits, so at first we had a lot of crushes."

Van Milligen feels it would have been wiser to use gilts (females farrowing for the first time) because these animals would have been unused to the crate system. As more gilts have been introduced to the pen system, crushing has decreased considerably. He speculates that animal selection may play a big role in reducing mortality further. Perhaps, he adds, "pigs should be selected on their mothering ability as well as on production and genetics."

Groups of a dozen sows are synchronized to farrow close to the same date. Ideally, the same group of sows would always farrow together, says van Milligen, so that they could maintain their social groups and pecking order. Otherwise, considerable antagonism and aggression can occur every time a group is changed.

Skeptics of the van Milligens' system say it is not possible to synchronize farrowing because the breeding cycles of sows will not always coincide. Consequently, when sows are interchanged between groups in order to maintain the optimum groups size of 12, they will begin to fight.

But van Milligen doesn't think fighting has been much of a problem. "The way I explain it to myself is that the sows are familiar with each other and the little bit of rearranging of pecking order that might take place occurs quickly because the sows are used to the open environment."

"What also helps is that the sows eat a lot of hay during times of the days when they want to do something else but sleep. It is altogether different from when years ago we hid the sows in dry sow stalls, and when you let them loose it took them a long time to establish a pecking order. We allow them to go into the farrowing room a week before the first one is due, so there is plenty of time to get settled down," says van Milligen.

Since building the new barn, van Milligen believes the health of his sows has improved steadily.

"When we had them on concrete, particularly in dry sow stalls, we were always coping with leg problems. Sows could either not walk or were slow getting up. These problems have disappeared," he says.

He also feels the onset of heat in his animals is much more regular. Repeating very seldom happens. They get bred and stay in pig.

"The greatest change that we noticed was that the sows were a lot more content. They are in their own environment and they have things to do. If we happen to be there they don't even pay attention to us. That is their expression of being somewhat at peace with their surroundings," he says.

One striking sensation after entering the barn is the quiet. Apart from the occasional grunt or squeal, there is a prevailing sense of calm that one normally finds only in cattle barns. In any other system, when you go into the barn the sows immediately take notice and they either get up or make a lot of noise.

Another reason for the quiet is the absence of ventilation fans humming in the background. The barns at the van Milligen's have a natural ventilation system with vents operated by an electronic thermostat. As a result, van Milligen feels he can keep his barn much cooler than conventional barns because the overall air flow is much lower without fans.

In mid-winter, the temperature in the sow barn is a comfortable 50° F, and the piglets are not under heat lamps because they have plenty of straw bedding to burrow in, plus the opportunity for ample movement.

Tom is often asked whether his pigs have respiratory problems because of dust associated with hay and straw bedding. He believes conventional barns are a lot more dusty.

The pigs spread the bales of bedding themselves, which saves on labour. The van Milligens say their daily chores take less time because there is less cleaning to do. They point out that although the loafing areas must be cleaned out every two months, this is labour that can easily be scheduled. An additional benefit from the bedding is that the nutrient-rich manure is bound up with the carbon-rich bedding, so disposal is not such an urgent task. Even though the van Milligens do very little cropping they feel the pig manure would make excellent fertilizer if it were composted.

Van Milligen is hesitant to cite statistics to prove the worth of the system, though people constantly badger him for numbers.

"Growth in the weaning barn is better than what it used to be, but we don't know whether it's better than on other farms. It is reasonable to think this system has something to do with it."

"On the other hand," he says, "with greater movement the sows go through more feed. A lot more, so we've actually had to lower the protein and energy level in the feed."

Sharon van Milligen also has an active role in the farm work even though Tom seems to be the designated spokesperson. Since there is no hired help, she has to look after the animals when Tom is away on one of his frequent speaking engagements. In her opinion as bookkeeper, she says their net return is about the same as with the conventional system.

One benefit of the new system which cannot be calculated is the welfare of those who do the chores. "Chores are much more a thing you enjoy," says Sharon, "and that means a lot less stress for us as well as the animals."

Indeed, after a leisurely tour through the barns with the van Milligens one gets the idea that animal husbandry rather than animal production is what brings their pigs to market.

There has been great interest in the van Milligen's housing system from farmers all over North America. In fact, engineer Larry Honey at the Kentville Research Station was so swamped by requests for drawings of the building that he was forced to charge a fee for what had been a free service.

Most visitors to the farm are impressed by the barns, says Sharon. They like the dry sow barn best, but are nervous about the farrowing system and the risk of crushing. So many decide to farrow in crates and only separate the piglets 10 days before putting them in groups.

As I left the van Milligens' farm a curious thought occurred to me. My clothes didn't smell after having spent an hour in the barn. That, I thought, was good agricultural PR. Most times visiting a pig barn means a quick ticket to the showers.

In fact, if I had had more time I wouldn't have minded going back into the barn to watch those pigs a little longer. It made me wonder whose welfare was better served by the new building, the pigs' or the van Milligens'.

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